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Tunisia is stable today, but worried about tomorrow

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TUNIS. Tunisia — This small country wedged in the western Mediterranean between Algeria and Libya has endured several assaults against its historic but endangered stability in the last year.

Most analysts in the region count Tunisia among the most moderate and most progressive states of the North African Maghreb, and a firm friend of the United States.

Under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba, the nation of about 7 million has made enormous strides toward democratization, sexual equality, public education and a higher-than-average standard of living since becoming an independent state.

But now, after three decades of independence, Mr. Bourguiba — declared president for life in 1974 — is 85 years old and in ill health. The question of who will take over after he dies is a source of anxiety among those who count on Tunisia as a stable state.

The high literacy rate among Tunisians is a source of pride, but the country's economy does not provide enough jobs for the number of Tunisians entering the job market. The country has a chronic unemployment rate of almost 20 percent.

Mr. Bourguiba's determination to build a secular state has provoked resentment in a sector of the population lately inspired by the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, especially among university students.

The emergence of a wealthy class separated by a large gap from the poor also has fed discontent.

"The country is in a severe economic crunch," said a Western diplomat stationed in Tunis. "Great discrepancies exist in Tunisian society. You have a questioning about values, and how far they have strayed from Islam. Someone could certainly tap the reservoir of concern here."

This summer, the "someone" turned out to be Col. Muammar el Kaddafi.

Beset with his own economic problems and furious over a visit to Washington by President Bourguiba, the Libyan leader suddenly began expelling tens of thousands of an estimated 90,000 Tunisians who were working in Libya.

The expulsion had a devastating effect on Tunisia, for it meant a drastic reduction in the foreign income brought in by those workers. It also meant that the Tunisian economy suddenly had to absorb these workers and find employment for them.

At the same time, according to Tunisian government sources and Western diplomats, Libya refused to pay for millions of dollars' worth of imports from Tunisia and canceled orders for even more. The net loss from the Libyan action was reported to be in the neighborhood of \$200 million.

"Stopping all this trade and the expulsions of Tunisian workers caused a very great crisis for this country, which already has severe economic problems," said Mahmoud Mestiri, the Tunisian secretary of state for foreign affairs.

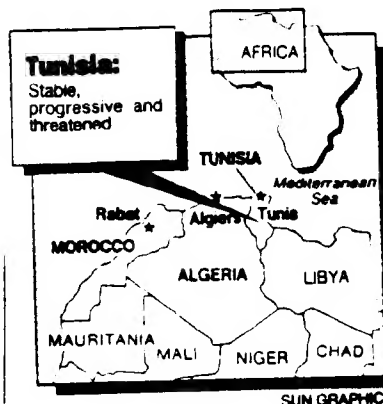
The relationship between the two countries turned nastier still when Libyan fighter planes entered Tunisian airspace three times in August.

Tunisia complained angrily. Washington warned that U.S. military force might be used to prevent Libyan incursions.

In September, according to officials, letter bombs were mailed to Tunisian journalists who had been writing against Libya. Postal workers were injured in three incidents.

Tunisia, contending that the letter bombs had been brought in by Libyans using their diplomatic immunity, broke diplomatic relations with its mischievous neighbor.

"All our positions are completely different," said Mr. Mestiri. "They want revolution. We are moderate.



They want socialism. We want a free economy. We dislike everything they do in foreign affairs. Kaddafi doesn't like what we do. Yet, we have tried to coexist."

Or, as one diplomatic source here put it, "Bourguiba feels very strongly that Kaddafi is a threat not only to the Maghreb but to the whole Mediterranean region. He believes that Kaddafi is crazy."

Now the money has stopped and the workers are coming back, so why should we maintain the posture of trying to cooperate?" asked Mr. Mestiri. "As long as Kaddafi is there, we are not going to have anything to do with them."

It was not the first time that Colonel Kaddafi had interfered dramatically in Tunisia. In 1974 he and President Bourguiba signed a unity accord, but Mr. Bourguiba reneged on the accord within 24 hours, and relations between the two countries have been sour ever since.

In 1980, an armed force tried to take over the central Tunisian town of Gafsa. The invasion was believed to have been directed from Libya by Tunisians trained in Libya. The invasion was put down, but it set off a massive increase in U.S. military aid to Tunisia, despite the contentions that what Tunis required was greater economic assistance, not tanks and aircraft.

Most intelligence sources believe that Colonel Kaddafi is training hundreds — perhaps thousands — of anti-government Tunisians.

"The danger from Kaddafi is real," said one Tunisian official. "He is a very dangerous man. He respects no international law, no neighborly pact."